

Unsung heroes in *Aeneid* 12

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Book 12 of the *Aeneid* is most famous as the poem's endgame, building up to and incorporating the final duel between Aeneas and Turnus. But what of the numerous other figures who people this book? Why has Vergil chosen to include them? Why do characters appear, only to be 'written out' of the narrative?

Royal hunt of the son

At the beginning of the book, the Italian king Latinus urges Turnus not to fight Aeneas in single combat (lines 19-45). Full of admiration and affection for Turnus, his words guide us to a more positive view of the Italian hero. They also re-establish the old king as a rounded figure deserving sympathy and respect. When Turnus insists on the duel, Latinus sets up a treaty with the Trojans, performs sacrifices and makes a majestic speech, ensuring more respect from us (lines 161 and following). But then forces beyond his control disrupt the treaty, open war breaks out and – Latinus flees. After that there are only two direct glimpses of him: in dire grief at his wife's suicide (lines 609-11) and 'dumbfounded' at the sight of Turnus and Aeneas when they eventually close for combat (lines 707-9). The dignified king of the beginning of the book – the king who had earlier, in Book 7, done his best to prevent war – slips out of the story.

Queen Amata, who also had a relatively important part to play in Book 7, pleads with Turnus at the beginning of Book 12 too (54-63), with extraordinary passion. In scarcely veiled terms, indeed, she vows her suicide in the event of Turnus' death (61-63). She holds the stage for the duration of these lines. But our next and last encounter with her is in a quite brief description of her suicide (595-604). Wrongly she believes that Turnus is already dead, and crazed with grief she believes herself guilty – both these misapprehensions lend pathetic irony to the scene – and she inflicts upon herself an 'ugly' death by hanging.

The dumb wait-er

Lavinia, the princess at the heart of the dispute between Turnus and Aeneas has made only two momentary entrances before Book 12. In this book she makes a much more dramatic appearance, though it too is still brief. After hearing Amata's appeal, she weeps and, famously, blushes. In the Homeric epic no-one ever blushes, and some of us think that this unheroic and very human reaction is a reflection of the love which she feels for the doomed Turnus. But she says nothing, and no more is said by the narrator. The narrative switches instantly to her effect upon Turnus, and our next and final picture of her is her grief following her mother's suicide.

Juno and the sidekick

Jupiter and Juno are grand players on high, but a minor deity Juturna is directly concerned in the action. She is (Vergil tells us) a sister of Turnus, whose virginity Jupiter had taken, and in exchange he had 'honoured' her with divinity. Juno (lines 138-60) exhorts her to prevent the Turnus-Aeneas duel. Juturna does this very willingly. For, though now immortal, she retains her mortal emotions, and loves her brother. She is eager therefore to keep him out of unequal individual combat with Aeneas (lines

222-37). When Aeneas himself enters war after his initial wounding, Juturna flees in fear, but then takes the place of Turnus' charioteer, and tries to keep Turnus out of Aeneas' way: misplaced kindness, for all this can do is speed up Aeneas' gathering anger. Finally Turnus admits to knowledge of her presence (lines 633-49) and in a heroic speech dismisses her: heroic for him, but she is left behind by him in a state of grief. Jupiter puts a final end to all possible assistance by Juturna by sending the incapacitating Fury, and all Juturna can do now is utter an as it were anticipatory lament for her doomed brother. And in this speech she reveals that, ironically, the 'honour' of Jupiter's immortality is a curse not a blessing, since it now ensures her everlasting suffering. We leave her mourning, groaning, and hiding away in one of the rivers over which she holds sway (885-6).

Look back in anger

Although some of these characters have had considerable parts to play earlier in the poem, all become minor players in Book 12. They are overtaken and eclipsed by greater events. Amata dies, Juturna is left in eternal lament; Latinus and Lavinia slip out of the poem after the shattering loss of respectively wife and mother. With them out of the way (as it were), our narrative can close with the big players: Turnus and Aeneas, Jupiter and Juno. 'Minor players': But why and in what way are they minor?

We should recall their counterparts in Homer's *Iliad*, the prototype for the military sections of the *Aeneid*. In Book 12 of the *Aeneid*, Latinus and Amata play a role analogous to those of Priam and Hecuba, the aged king and queen of Homer's Troy. Lavinia clearly performs the function of the Helen of the *Iliad*, and in the immortal Juturna who retains her mortal capacity for human love there is much to remind us of Achilles' mother Thetis.

Well, these Homeric characters are hardly the protagonists of the *Iliad*, and so they are minor in a sense; but they are all given scenes of climactic significance, *especially* at the end of the poem. After the death of Hector, Priam goes into the enemy camp on to his brave approach to Achilles to ransom Hector's body, and by his brilliantly judged appeal to the Achaean hero contributes towards the magnificent scene of humanity and reconciliation in the final book of the *Iliad*. The enigmatic Helen was introduced to us in *Iliad* 3, and Hecuba and (especially) Helen were given substance and individuality in Book 6. The close of the whole *Iliad* is then dominated by the laments of three women, Andromache, Hecuba and Helen. These laments by individualised women bring out the human loss caused by war and heroism, and confirm the poem's emphasis upon tragic suffering. By the end of the poem, we will be loath to call Priam, Hecuba and Helen characters that are minor in importance.

Waiting for goddesses

Thetis is not a god of Olympus, displays the emotions of a mere mortal mother, and has strictly limited appearances. But these appearances are made at critical moments and to huge effect: she secures the temporary defeat of the Achaeans in Book 1, organises divine armour for Achilles' re-entry to battle in 18 (and advises him when she delivers it at the beginning of 19), and in

24 is summoned to convey to Achilles Zeus' wish for the return of Hector's body. A minor goddess maybe, but by the end of the poem we will not consider her role any more minor in importance than that of the mortals just mentioned.

Arms and the woman

Contrast Latinus and Amata, Lavinia, Juturna. In Book 12 they become minor characters in every sense, cleared away in a few brief words to leave the spotlight on the protagonists. But this is not merely a narrative device. There is a great significance in their ruthlessly exposed minor roles. The smaller players in the *Iliad* matter and have a climactic part to play at the end because, simply, they do matter. 'What about *us*?' say Homer's richly characterised women, and their anguished voices have to be heard, because the value system of the poem cares about them, just as it recognises that feeble old men can achieve their own form of heroism. But the *Aeneid* tells of a world which is in some – not all – ways harsher, for it is concerned with the growth of a nation and a leader. And when attention is directed to national progress, minor individuals may not count for much, and find themselves left behind and disregarded. I hasten to say that this attitude to minor individuals is not shared by *Vergil*, the narrator, himself. He cares enough about one potentially minor character to make her a major character: Dido. The suicide of Amata and the anguish of Lavinia and Latinus are told briefly but movingly. The lament of Juturna is lovingly composed before it is overtaken by the progressing narrative. And the hero Aeneas cares, to an extent, about such characters.

But the destiny that shapes and guides Aeneas does not care, nor does it have time for people except for the protagonists, and it expects its main hero to grow into the same ideology. From this point of view Latinus is just an old king with dignity and good nature, but no power. Displays of passion and partisanship by wives like Amata are dangerous blips in the scheme of things. Lavinia's importance is as the ancestress of Romans, but her personality, provided it is acquiescent, is of no consequence. The narrative is thus true to this kind of value system – which is not, I repeat, Vergil's own value system – when it sidelines Latinus and Lavinia, and does not mention Amata after her tragic death. As for Juturna, Jupiter is as callous towards an unimportant deity, as he is uninterested in the private fortunes of those who come in the way of Aeneas – and in the private fortune of Aeneas himself – and so she is just left to mourn. What destiny and Jupiter care about is Trojan/Roman success. Ruthlessly, the narrative reflects this, discards the minor characters, and closes with the protagonists who hold the key.

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